

JOHN WARNER & SONS – “BIG BEN” BELL FOUNDERS

Maurice Harp

Mike Bavin sent me an illustration of this wonderful illustrated envelope that he had found in an auction catalogue some years ago. Although the stamp is not perfinned there is of course a perfin connection. The envelope was used by John Warner & Sons who were famous bell founders based in Cripplegate, London EC. The large bell in the centre at the top of the envelope is labelled “Big Ben – 16 tons” probably the most famous bell in the world – or is it?



John Warner & Sons was begun in 1739 and was under continuous family ownership for more than two centuries. They manufactured a wide variety of products before finally closing in 1949. Warner began making bells in 1788, and continued to do so until 1924. Their total

production of bells is unknown, but there are approximately 2550 surviving known Warner bells.

The Warner foundry (or foundries) operated at various locations in London from before 1782 until about 1924. These locations included Cheapside, Cripplegate (2 Jewin Crescent, commonly known as the Crescent Foundry), Spitalfields (Spelman Street) and Fleet Street. Warner kept the Jewin Crescent address as their registered office after the Spitalfields location was developed in the 1870s. Other Warner foundries or works were located at Tendring, Essex and at Stockton-on-Tees, where the original Big Ben was cast.

Following the fire at the Palace of Westminster in 1834 it was decided that the new building would have a tower and clock with chiming bells. The largest bell would be the largest that had been cast up until that time and at 16 tons was far bigger than the then biggest “Great Peter” at York which weighed a mere 10¾ tons. John Warner & Sons at their Stockton-on-Tees foundry were commissioned to do the job. However when the bell was tested on the 6th August 1859 at the Westminster yard the bell cracked and could not be repaired. The famous Whitechapel Bell Foundry then took on the job of recasting a smaller bell – only 13.7 tons – using the metal from Warner’s bell and this is the famous bell we know today.



Even with their failure to cast a successful bell, Warners' took full advantage of any publicity going. They used the telegraphic address of “Big Ben, London”, and they displayed the bell in advertising material such as the envelope above.

The company is known to have used just one perfin J.W&S – J8590.01 which was used through a major part of the company’s life.

Big Ben is of course often confused with clock in the Westminster Tower. The clock however was manufactured by E. Dent & Co. The company was founded in 1814 by Edward J Dent and was from the start a manufacturer of precision instruments. One of their chronometers was taken by Charles Darwin on the Beagle and others were taken by Stanley and Livingstone to Africa. They manufactured

the Standard clocks for Italy, Spain, Russia, U.S.A. and surprisingly for Switzerland. Their reputation was further enhanced when they



were selected in 1871 to manufacture the Standard Clock at the Royal Observatory Greenwich.

In 1852 they were selected, against stiff opposition, to make the clock for the Westminster Palace tower. The tower building ended up being delayed and was completed in 1859, 5 years late. The company still exists today, producing high quality watches & clocks as well as public clocks for countries all around the world.

Dent & Co is thought to have used a very distinctive perfin DENT inside a triangle –

D1590.01. The design was the company's trade mark so although the identity is not confirmed there is little doubt that they used this perfin. However this scarce perfin, which has only been reported on a handful of stamps, was only used for a short period from 1881 – 1885.



E. Dent & Co - Trademark

1881 - 1885



D1590.01